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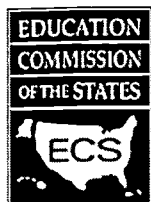
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## ABSTRACT

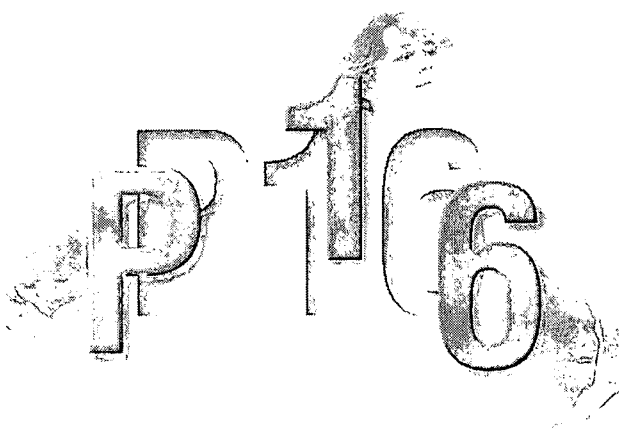
After a period of decline, dropout rates are on the rise. Relative to students in other countries, American students do well at elementary level and later lag behind. Students are becoming more ethnically diverse. By 2010, immigrants' children are expected to account for one in five of students. In the new economy, college degrees and computer skills are in demand. Just as imperative is the ability to work independently, to think critically, to communicate effectively, and to function as part of a team. Students and their achievement should be at the core of curriculum and accountability measures. Redesigning public education requires rethinking longstanding practices and recognizing that the traditional beginnings and endings of formal schooling have grown irrelevant. Schools should provide extensive high-quality learning opportunities to children before kindergarten. Education should no longer use the lock-step method of student promotion since learning and advancement move at various paces. Transition between levels, from prekindergarten to university, should be smooth. Having enough high-quality teachers to accomplish all of this is imperative. Teachers educate to give facts, understanding, and power to observe the world, as well as to enrich citizenship and cultural awareness. In the future, education will have to become more customized to reach these goals. (Author/RKJ)



# Imperatives for Change: The Case for Radically Redesigning Public Education in America

*By Ferrel Guillory*

**The First in a Series of Essays Supported by the Metropolitan Life  
Foundation Change in Education Initiative**



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*The more you do to improve education, the more you discover what is yet to be done. Each breakthrough opens a window on another unexplored frontier.*

– Terry Sanford

It is the purpose of this essay to point toward the frontier in American education in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To be sure, important exploration has already taken place. But the time has arrived for policymakers and opinion leaders to begin the journey into the next frontier – a journey leading to a radical redesign of the nation's schools, colleges and universities.

Redesigning public education requires rethinking longstanding practices and recognizing that the traditional “beginnings” and “endings” of formal schooling have grown increasingly irrelevant. Thus, the nation must get serious about:

- Providing extensive, high-quality early learning opportunities to children before kindergarten
- Putting students and their achievement at the center of consideration in designing core curriculum and accountability measures
- Moving away from the lock-step method of student promotion from one grade to the next – and moving toward a system that allows students to learn and advance at varying paces
- Stepping up efforts dramatically to ensure that the nation has enough teachers and that its corps of teachers and principals are of the highest quality
- Meshing the distinct components of the current system – pre-kindergarten, elementary and secondary schools, community colleges and universities – to smooth the transition of students from one level of the system to the next.

For governors, legislators, state and local officials, school administrators and parents, a radical redesign of the education system may seem a daunting, far-off prospect. Immediate issues and attendant controversies – such as raising standards, implementing high-stakes testing and addressing inequities in financing – offer a fully challenging agenda.

For more than three decades, after all, education reform efforts have come and gone, and come again. Some have stuck, some have not. In some cases, one package of reforms has hardly had time to gain traction before another set is promulgated. Educators find themselves buffeted by shifting, sometimes contradictory, demands, while public officials and business executives fret over the slow, uneven pace of reform.

Terry Sanford's words serve as a reminder that education will remain a work in progress, and that leadership demands not only vision but also perseverance.

The sentences quoted above appear in Sanford's book, *But What About the People?*, written in 1966, shortly after he completed his term as governor of North Carolina, and while he was leading the effort that led to the creation of the Education Commission of the States (ECS).

At the time when Sanford wrote those words, human feet had yet to press prints in the dust of the moon. Schools rushed to upgrade instruction in science and math as their contribution to the space race. The Voting Rights Act had just been enacted, while many white Southerners still resisted full desegregation of their schools. Not just in the South, but all across America, educational institutions were being called upon to serve as vital instruments in creating a more just society.

Today, powerful and intersecting forces of globalization, demographic change, technology and a knowledge revolution have set in motion fundamental structural changes in the economy and in society. The U.S. Census Bureau has reported that Hispanics now match African-Americans as a share of the nation's population. Urban schools today serve a student population speaking more than 40 different

languages at home – further evidence that the nation's schools are educating the most diverse array of students in their history.

Clearly, grappling with these powerful forces and trends will require more than changes in our public education system. Schools by themselves cannot close gaps in income and wealth, cannot ensure adequate and affordable health care, cannot relieve stresses and strains in families. Still, schools remain crucial to America's economy, its quality of life and its democracy.

Sanford's observation that each breakthrough in education opens a window onto another challenging frontier rings even truer today than it did 35 years ago.

## Why We Educate

*To give to every citizen the information he needs for the transaction of his own business... To understand his duties to his neighbors and country and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either.... And, in general, to observe with intelligence and faithfulness all the social relations under which he shall be placed.*

– Thomas Jefferson

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*Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 50,000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental.... We must insist upon this to give our children a fairness of a start which will equip them with such an array of facts and such an attitude toward truth that they can have a real chance to judge what the world is and what its greater minds have thought it to be.*

– W.E.B. DuBois

Different men of different eras, one white and one black, Jefferson and DuBois both thought deeply about America's responsibility to educate its citizens. Each in his own way saw education as giving people both facts and understanding – as well as power to observe the world around them and to enrich their citizenship. Each articulated in his own time what American leaders today must understand for their own time – the multiple imperatives that require persistent efforts to align education to the needs of society.

## The New Economy Imperative

The new economy of intense "creative destruction" – giving birth to new jobs while simultaneously destroying old jobs – is drastically altering the patterns of work. For many, the new economy means expanded opportunities; for others, the disruption of old patterns heightens insecurities.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics recently revised its 10-year projections for job growth and decline. In rate of growth, projections show the five top occupations all computer-related, with the next five in legal, health and social services. In terms of growth in numbers of workers, the top 10 occupations include low-wage jobs such as retail salespeople, cashiers and office clerks, but also higher-wage jobs such as systems analysts, nurses, managers and executives. Declines are anticipated in private child-care workers, sewing and textile machine operators and typists.

Over the past two decades, the earnings premium for additional education has increased. Since 1975, according to census data, average annual earnings for high school graduates have been nearly stagnant, rising from just below to just above \$23,000, in constant dollars. Meanwhile, earnings for people with a bachelor's degree rose by \$8,000, to \$43,800, and for people with an advanced degree by nearly \$15,000, to \$63,500.

But the new economy isn't only about shifts in jobs and income. It also is about the emergence of new organizational structures, with more workers being given more authority and expected to work in teams. Business leaders say they need workers able to think critically and to communicate effectively. Yet, as Thomas G. Mortenson reports in his *Postsecondary Education Opportunity* newsletter, "The labor market is somewhat over-supplied with insufficiently educated workers, and significantly under-supplied with workers at the level of bachelor's degree and above."

Just as American education responded to industrialization and the space race, so now it must help prepare the nation – and its young people – for an era of accelerating change brought on by the new economy. The radical reshaping of the American economy argues for a radical redesign of American education.

### ***The Democratic Imperative***

Jefferson understood that his new nation needed citizens with competence in the duties and responsibilities of self-government. But Jefferson, the agrarian, could not have imagined the complexities of governing the post-industrial nation that the United States has become.

Just as the nation's economy needs workers who are flexible thinkers and problem solvers, so the nation's public life needs citizens who are flexible thinkers and problem solvers capable of understanding and exercising sound judgment on public issues. What's more, with the United States rapidly becoming a genuinely multi-ethnic country, it remains the task of the common schools to inculcate a sense of common nationhood, an appreciation of the values and demands of a democracy, and a willingness to embrace our multi-ethnicity.

As Robert D. Putnam observed in his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, "We know that knowledge about public affairs and practice in everyday civic skills are prerequisites for effective participation." Yet the United States has suffered from a diminution of social capital and civic engagement, a "generation gap" in political knowledge and a 40-year slide in electoral participation, Putnam noted.

Americans with college degrees participate in elections at a significantly greater rate than Americans without degrees. People with bachelor's degrees or above represent 25% of the population, yet they accounted for 40% of voters in the 2000 presidential election, according to the Voter News Service's exit polls.

The anemia evident in the American body politic also argues for a redesign of the nation's schools in service to its democracy.

### ***The Good-Life Imperative***

Americans live their lives in many dimensions, not limited to the economy and politics. Not only are they workers and voters, but also parents, consumers, neighbors, spectators and worshipers.

Jefferson saw education as giving people the power to observe the world around them with "intelligence and faithfulness." DuBois, while seeking the empowerment of those who had been left out and enslaved in Jefferson's time, also considered education as critical to people having "a real chance to judge what the world is."

Clearly, education is an increasingly vital prerequisite of economic advancement and political participation. Beyond that, education imbues people with the power to take better care of their health, to become knowledgeable purchasers of consumer products, to make more informed choices in parenting, to appreciate and enjoy art, music and other aspects of our culture

In an age of enormous mobility, of information overload, of global flows of data that override longstanding boundaries, it is essential that Americans develop a deeper understanding of history, an ability to put disparate data in context and a frame of mind that goes beyond stereotypes and includes a vision of the future.

The nation serves itself through its schools by forming well-rounded individuals who act ethically, think critically and participate in the building of communities.

### **Why the Old System Sputters**

*America's education system is in the sort of crisis that Detroit's car industry faced in the 1970s, before Japanese imports almost destroyed it in the 1980s.*

– The Economist

Like many critics of U.S. schools, *The Economist*, a London-based international magazine, overstates what it sees as the decline and failures of the American education system. A more realistic, less pejorative assessment would take into account that the nation's education system is not in fact a single system, but rather an array of city, suburban and rural schools with uneven tax bases, diverse student populations and, as test scores point out, varying student achievement levels. Millions of young Americans excel in superior schools, while millions of their peers fall behind and grow bored in schools that fail, for a combination of reasons, to light a spark.

RAND's analysis last year of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test scores showed significant gains in math, with some states making more progress than others in student performance. Significantly, the RAND study suggested that focused public policy and targeted spending can make a difference, noting that the "public education system can and has used some additional resources effectively, particularly when directed to minority and disadvantaged students."

Another sign of progress in educating young Americans comes in census data on education by race and ethnicity. In 1950, only 23.6% of blacks between the ages of 25 and 29 had completed high school. In 1999, 88.2% of blacks in this age group had a high school diploma – ahead of the 87.6% of whites. As Mortenson notes, "It is probably impossible to overstate the magnitude of this achievement."

Of course, kids aren't cars; they are not mere consumer products. Yet *The Economist* has a point in drawing an analogy between the auto industry and public education. In the 1970s, U.S. carmakers turned out big, shiny, powerful vehicles, but jolts in oil supply and prices, rising environmental consciousness, shifts in consumers tastes and other forces posed a threat to the domestic industry's long-cherished ways of doing business. The industry changed in order to prosper anew. In its own way and with the immensely more complex challenge of educating all children, so must America's schools.

Here are some signs of stresses and strains on the system, with the traditional approach to education increasingly out of alignment:

- After a period of decline, high-school dropout rates appear to be rising again, particularly in large urban school systems. The national percentage of students who graduated from high school in four years fell from 73% in 1986 to 68% in 1998. The dropout rate among Hispanics is alarmingly high.
- While young black Americans have closed the gap in high-school completion with whites, a wide gap remains in college-degree attainment. One in three whites between the ages of 25 and 29 has at least a bachelor's degree, according to census data, compared with only 15% of blacks and 9% of Hispanics.
- While U.S. students tend to do well on standardized tests in elementary school relative to students in other countries, their performance falls in middle school and lags significantly behind students in other countries in high school.
- America has an aging teacher force, with school systems now facing intensifying shortages. In five years, teaching positions are projected to account for 20% of the jobs available to college graduates. In 10 years, the nation will have to replace three in four of its current teachers. Even more teachers will be required in order to reduce class size.
- Meanwhile, the pool of school-age children is about to expand dramatically and to grow more ethnically diverse. Immigrants' children are expected to account for one in five students by 2010.

But such data – and even more that could be cited – tells only part of the story of why the traditional system is out of alignment. It also is important to look at what is well-known, though not subject to easy quantification. For example:

- Neurological and psychological development researchers have promulgated findings on how young children learn, findings that legislators and educators are coming to understand more fully. Considerable learning – including cues picked up from the speech and facial expressions of parents – takes place before a child enters kindergarten.



- Research on the sleep and metabolism patterns of teenagers have pointed out that they are typically less alert in the mornings and do not wind down until near midnight. And yet high schools typically open shortly after sunrise and dismiss students in mid-afternoon.
- As the Commission on the High School Senior Year has noted, many high school seniors drift through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. And for many students, the freshman year at a college or a university amounts to little more than a repetition of advanced high school courses.
- Many studies have established a link between the quality of a student's education and the quality of his or her teachers. Yet it is widely recognized that students most in need of high-quality teachers are in schools with concentrations of under-qualified teachers, in classrooms with inexperienced teachers or in hard-to-staff schools.
- Expectations matter. Students excel when they strive for high achievement expected of them by parents and teachers. But too many students languish as a result of low expectations. In a recent Metropolitan Life survey, 71% of students said they expected to attend a four-year college, while their teachers expected only 32% of students to attend college. Raising expectations for students from whom too little is now expected would go a long way toward closing the achievement gap.

Across America, as Kettering Foundation president David Matthews has observed, there is a "growing fissure" between the public and the nation's public schools. At the same time, there is a growing consensus – from the left, right and center, from Democrats and Republicans, from business executives and issue-advocates – that the nation cannot afford to leave any student behind, and that all children can learn to their full potential when encouraged and prodded by sensitive adults. In the not-too-distant past, the idea of an education for all was honored more in rhetoric than in actual practice. But to close the fissure and to turn the consensus into actual practice, American education cannot – as Detroit discovered – continue to rely on traditional models.

## Where We Go from Here

*At the moment, the old education system is dying and a new system is being born. For those of us living through the change, it is easier to see what we are losing than what is emerging – a system of customized education for each of our children.*

– Arthur Levine

The standards-and-accountability movement has swept across America. Tests have emerged as a primary lever for change, nearly sweeping other reform measures off the table. While imposing higher standards and enforcing them through accountability measures surely galvanizes the old system, American education remains locked in an industrial design ill-equipped to deal with radical shifts in the economy and society.

As Levine, president of Teachers College, Columbia University, suggests, the nation is entering a new educational era, but what's just over the horizon cannot be fully imagined, especially by elected officials, policymakers and parents who themselves were educated in the old system. But during this transitional period, it is possible to outline the core elements of a new system and to identify additional levers for change.

### Enhancing Early Learning

The nation is being pulled inexorably toward new arrangements for child services before age five. The pull stems in part from research into the brain development of children, but also from dramatic economic and social forces that have resulted in, among other things, seven in 10 adult women now in the workforce. Whether because of the expansion of career opportunities or because of economic necessity in families, says Richard Clifford, co-director of the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the influx of women into the workforce is "the defining shift in American life in our lifetime."

The need, therefore, is for building a coherent early-learning system, with its own set of standards and accountability. Yet, as New Hampshire Governor Jeanne Shaheen notes, "Our children's early years – from birth to school entry – receive less attention from policymakers, and lower levels of public investment, than any other stage in their journey toward adulthood." A redesigned system would provide

access to high-quality care and learning for all children, ending the neglect of needy children. Such a system would not replace parents, but rather complement and bolster their efforts. Such a system would require dramatically improving the training, credentialing and compensating of the workers who care for young children, as well as providing more effective health care and parental leave policies.

### ***Smoothing Student Transitions***

Roy Romer, the former Colorado governor who is now superintendent of the Los Angeles school system, says that the U.S. has got it backwards: "What is fixed is how long you sit in the seat; what is variable is what you know when you get out. We need to focus very hard on what happens in the classroom."

The existing industrial-model system packs 20-30 students of the same age in a room together with a teacher (and sometimes an aide). They are expected to master a certain amount of material in 180 days of class time, and then move on to the next grade the next school year. Typically, students who do not fit neatly into this arrangement are considered either "gifted" or, at the other end of the spectrum, as having "learning disabilities."

Currently, the four points of transition that are especially critical to students are from home to the first out-of-home learning environment; from early learning to elementary school; from the middle years to high school; and from high school to college or to the workplace. Focusing on these transition points can serve as a stimulus for envisioning a redesigned system.

Momentum is building for rethinking the current time-bound grade-level system. A redesigned system would permit all students to learn at different paces. Such a system would have to include certain "educational benchmarks" and would have to attend to the social and physical maturation of students. It takes some imagination to consider how Levine's vision of customized education would play out in individual schools. It surely would restructure the one-teacher-per-class arrangement; it would infuse schools with the new managerial and operational approaches being used by for-profit and nonprofit organizations as they adapt to new-economy dynamics.

The nation has become less sure-footed in its approach to the years of adolescence. Businesses complain again and again that a high school diploma contains no guarantee that a graduate is prepared for the workforce, and some high school graduates discover they are unprepared for college work without remediation. Americans are even less sure of what to do about and what to expect out of grades 6, 7 and 8.

Building connections has become more urgent -- from middle school to high school, from middle school and high school to community colleges, from high schools to universities. But there are profound differences in cultures between middle schools and high schools, between public schools and community colleges, and between schools and the workplace. Building a "seamless" path requires blasting away some rock and bulldozing through terrain that has long divided educational institutions from one other.

### ***Learning Throughout a Lifetime***

It is increasingly imperative that more and more Americans continue their education beyond high school. Under pressure to handle an anticipated enrollment bulge from the baby-boom echo, colleges and universities actually should prepare to expand their enrollments beyond the "natural" increase.

Colleges and universities are somewhat ahead of their elementary and secondary counterparts in thinking about how to redesign themselves. Many are already incorporating technologies that allow "distance" learning, as they experience growing competition from for-profit schools and companies marketing educational products.

In a world that requires lifelong learning, elementary and secondary schools, as well as undergraduate colleges, must accept the task of teaching students how to use more effectively the Internet and the technological devices that now bring an avalanche of information, data and so much electronic detritus to their fingertips. What is needed is the instilling of the habits of learning. And universities, as well as community colleges, will find themselves increasingly drawn to offer education to adults seeking to upgrade their competencies throughout their working lives.



Moreover, community colleges and universities have special roles to play in shaping the American economy and society. In its *State of the South* report, MDC Inc., a Chapel Hill-based nonprofit research firm, suggests that community colleges should become the hub of a system for the constant and massive retraining of adults. Universities' role in creating and transferring knowledge and in producing specialized talent is "more important than ever," according to the report.

## **Measuring Progress**

To redesign American education is not to discard the concept of accountability. It stands to reason that, if the old age-based, lock-step, seat-time process is replaced, the redesigned system must entail a fundamental reconceptualization of how to measure progress and report results.

The new system would allow students to move on to more challenging material as soon as they master its prerequisites. Such a system would surely require multiple indicators of accountability, requiring educators and policymakers to come up with innovative ways to assess learning and to provide accountability to parents and to the public. To shift to such a system would require a "re-education" of parents and teachers, as well as communities, which now rely primarily on traditional test measurements as guides to schools' performance.

The challenge is to establish clear and challenging learning standards, while allowing the pace of learning to vary. This won't be easy, and it won't come overnight, but developing a comprehensive accountability system focused on student learning is central to a radical redesign.

## **Why Change**

*There must be a recognition that the ultimate challenge lies in the educational and economic advancement of people who have gotten left behind. We must get the message out to every household, and especially every poor household, that the only road out of poverty runs by the schoolhouse. Discrimination is not limited to race. The line that separates the well-educated from the poorly educated is the harshest fault line of all.*

– Former Mississippi Governor William Winter

The Education Commission of the States (ECS), with support from Metropolitan Life Foundation, has launched the Change in Education Initiative out of a fundamental concern for the future of public education as a foundation of the American experience. This concern is made more urgent by the diverse and changing needs of the new wave of students entering educational institutions now and in the coming decade. Together, ECS and the foundation seek to build on, support and extend the progress states have made over the past two decades in improving the quality and performance of public education.

As Hugh B. Price, president of the National Urban League, has said, "Since 95% of our youngsters attend public schools, what's urgently needed is radical reform that structures public education so that its sole *raison d'être* is student success." It is the intention of ECS and the Foundation to spark debate, encourage experimentation and accelerate the pace of change in how this nation educates its citizens, with the central focus on the needs – and the success – of students.

At the heart of this process is a belief that our nation should provide access to education to match anyone's aspirations. It is a process devoted equally to equity and to excellence – to the idea that there is no conflict in eliminating achievement gaps and in sustaining schools of the highest caliber.

This is not a process calling for change for change's sake. It recognizes that the journey into a new frontier causes anxiety and uncertainty. But change is necessary to erase that "harshest fault line of all."

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*Pew Charitable Trusts, nine reports will be published during 2001. The reports will be available on the ECS Web site at [www.ecs.org](http://www.ecs.org)*

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